"The Bliss of Solitude": The Poetry and Poetics of Being Alone

Barry Spurr

Introduction

It all begins in the garden, with several other seminal ideas, and with a single sacred text that declares: "And the Lord God said: It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him."[1] God, having made this declaration, goes on directly to the creation of the beasts of the field and fowls of the air, finally producing Eve from Adam's rib as the anticipated help meet. By the eighteenth century, noun and adjective had joined and the term "helpmate" was formed, usually applied to the female spouse, but not necessarily, subsequently. Adam announces: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."[2] There is no gap between leaving mother and father and cleaving to wife. The chapter concludes with not just Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, together, but (insistently, again) "the man and his wife," putting the matrimonial seal on this paradigm of adult human existence which brooks no exceptions and forms a seamless narrative from childhood, under the parental marital pairing, to adulthood. The Lord declares that this is "good." Man alone is "not good." As John Milton noted, ironically in one of his tracts advocating divorce, "loneliness is the first thing which God's eye nam'd not good."[3]

Often, an Old Testament verse and teaching is linked to one in the New Testament, which is usually seen to complement or complete it. Customarily, in this case, it is Paul's declaration that it is "better to marry than to burn"; not in Hell, but with illicit passion, which, for Paul, amounts to the same thing.[4] The lifelong bachelor apostle's commendation of marriage in these terms must rate as one of the best examples of damning with faint praise. Sacred texts like these, which we see (and history has shown) as forming behaviour may themselves

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[1] Genesis 2:18, *The Bible*, KJV (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[2] Genesis 2:24, *The Bible*.

[3] John Milton, *Tetrachordon* (1645) at http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/tetrachordon/genesis/text.shtml. Accessed 26/10/2011.

[4] I Corinthians 7:9, *The Bible*.

have been formed by behaviour, or misbehaviour. The endorsement by God of the marital state no doubt conforms with the desire of those who approved Genesis as part of the canon of scripture, also to endorse it. That determination – which we see to this day in the citing of the biblical text in support of traditional marriage – may have derived as much from anxiety about its precariousness, as from the recognition of its divinely-ordained inevitability. Whatever the case, one thing is certain: within Judeo-Christian religious and social history, and the vast literature which reflects, expresses, and probes it, the heterosexual coupled state, for adults, is normative; the solitary state is eccentric. When Greta Garbo was reported as saying, "I want to be alone," people thought she must have lost her mind. How could someone so beautiful and famous desire solitude? Because of the radical oddity of the statement, it is as much remembered today as her starring roles in several films.

I have read and heard several interviews with the contemporary British novelist, Alan Hollinghurst. Without fail, it is mentioned that he lives alone in London and he is always required to explain himself in this regard, to a society that rates being alone a close second to having to speak before an audience in the catalogue of the terrors that human existence can present. Hollinghurst routinely responds that he has never felt lonely and enjoys his own company. In the face of this astonishing revelation, interviewers drop the subject as if the interviewee has confessed to some kind of unmentionable personal failure or private fetish.[5] Beyond eccentricity, the choice of solitude can be seen as actively tending to anti-social behaviour, and even as the nursery of vicious and criminal acts. The perpetrators of some of the worst crimes are almost invariably revealed to be loners, as speculation unfolds about causes for their wickedness. For example, though the journalist later notes the murderer had a history of mental illness, when Joseph McAndrew killed his parents and twin brother in a (likely schizophrenic) rage, the first words used to describe him in the report in *The Daily Mail* were "loner and introvert."[6]

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[5] Amusingly, the books by the champions of solitude are almost invariably dedicated to and/or seem especially anxious to make fulsome acknowledgement to the partners and families of the authors. To take just a couple of examples: Anneli Rufus' *Party of One: The Loners' Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2003, p. vii) is dedicated to no less than four people (cited, furthermore, as "friends" in case we had assumed that she had none) and the publisher of Barry Stone's *I Want to Be Alone* (Sydney: Murdoch Books, 2010, p. 251) needs to tell us that, in fact, Barry is very much not alone; he lives with his wife Maryvonne and two sons.

[6] '"Extermination:" Man, 23, "stabs to death his twin brother, mother and father with 18-inch sword,"' *The Daily Mail* (8/3/2011), at http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1363888/Joseph-McAndrew-23-

This article traces some of the many and varied representations and discussions of solitude found in poetry. Through the centuries of English verse, poets who lived lives of varying degrees of solitude themselves have worried the concept, producing some remarkable utterances, reflecting individual poets' concerns about the solitary state – sometimes issuing in exultant celebration of it; in other cases, more interestingly, in more mixed ideas and emotions about it; as well, of course, as negative representations of it. These poems enrich reflection on and discussion of the subject in general.

Solitude in English Poetry

The discrimination between loneliness and solitude is a major issue in this field of inquiry, and we find that two of the best-known poems about solitude, by two of the best-known poets, are reflections on this theme. In William Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' (1815 version) loneliness is prioritised in the titular opening phrase, and although the simile of cloudiness seems to extend the negativity already introduced in the aimlessness of wandering (to which loneliness has added a further grimness), amelioration is set in motion when that cloud itself is happily described in its natural freedom: it "floats on high o'er vales and hills" and the poetic sentence continues, unbroken, to the vision of a "host of golden daffodils," to which the wandering of loneliness has unexpectedly but exultingly brought the speaker.[7] "A poet could not but be gay," Wordsworth reflects, after describing the daffodils' lively beauty, "in such a jocund company."[8] This remembered event, which transformed loneliness, remains to fill his heart with pleasure and to make it dance with the daffodils now as it did then. They, and the experience are summoned by virtue of the "inward eye" which is "the bliss of solitude,"[9] as a remembered experience produced by loneliness becomes a repeated enjoyment, which the solitary state alone can summon.

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's longer poem, 'This Lime-tree Bower my Prison' (1797), we see the development from a lamentation of loneliness, figured as an imprisonment, because Coleridge was physically incapacitated from an accident that year and unable to join his friends' rambles through the countryside

exterminated-mother-father-twin-samurai-sword.html#ixzz35S0xDfaB. Accessed 23/6/2014.

[7] William Wordsworth, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud', *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), XIL, lines 1-5.

[8] Wordsworth, XIL, lines 15-6.

[9] Wordsworth, XIL, lines 21-2.

in Somerset, to an appreciation of the benefits of that solitude.[10] This positive development is already anticipated in the title of the poem (and readers sometimes forget that titles are parts of poems): to be imprisoned in a lime-tree bower is a not-too-punitive incarceration.

Beginning off-handedly, the speaker conveys a sense of resignation to the bereavement of companionship and shared experiences:

> Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,
> This lime-tree bower my prison! I have lost
> Beauties and feelings, such as would have been
> Most sweet to my remembrance even when age
> Had dimm'd mine eyes to blindness![11]

Then he meditates on what the others are experiencing and rejoices in their experiences, which, through the vividness of his imagination, he is coming to share vicariously (and possibly even more richly from pondering them in separation). He apprehends "a delight" which "Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad / As I myself were there!"[12] So the initially resented bower has become a place of enrichment and even possesses a humble beauty of its own, worth contemplating:

> Nor in this bower,
> This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark'd
> Much that has sooth'd me….[13]

The conclusion is a celebration of what solitude can afford, a hymn of praise, in the Romantic way, to the poet's heightened powers of perception and a wise statement about human psychology:

> Henceforth I shall know
> That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;
> No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,
> No waste so vacant, but may well employ
> Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart
> Awake to Love and Beauty! and sometimes
> 'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,
> That we may lift the soul, and contemplate
> With lively joy the joys we cannot share.[14]

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[10] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'This Lime-tree Bower my Prison', *The Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Derwent and Sara Coleridge (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1857), pp. 242-5.
[11] Coleridge, 'This Lime-tree Bower my Prison', lines 1-5.
[12] Coleridge, 'This Lime-tree Bower my Prison', lines 44-6.
[13] Coleridge, 'This Lime-tree Bower my Prison', lines 46-8.
[14] Coleridge, 'This Lime-tree Bower my Prison', lines 60-8.

Coleridge speaks of being "bereft of promis'd good," but bereavement more usually understood, as in the death of a beloved, also produces the solitude of loneliness from which no good can come. The most notable poetic expression of this is Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam* of 1850 in which his desolation at the death of Arthur Henry Hallam brings him, in one of the most remarkable of the long poem's one hundred and thirty-three cantos, to the Hallam house in Wimpole Street.[15] Arriving at the Hallams' house of mourning, Tennyson registers his loneliness in an urban streetscape that would do credit to the Modernists, seventy years later:

> He is not here; but far away
> The noise of life begins again,
> And ghastly thro' the drizzling rain
> On the bald street breaks the blank day.[16]

The breaking of the blank day is perfectly matched by the breaking of the rhythm, assisted by the *decelerando* stressed by alliteration as the bond of friendship has been broken by death and leaves the speaker literally stranded.

A variant of the usual representation of the individual alone is that of a couple in isolation, together. The archetypal example of this, in art as well as in poetry, are Adam and Eve, both before and after the Fall, but emphatically so, afterwards, when they are newly at odds, now as they were not before, with God and their environment. So, in Milton's closing phrase in *Paradise Lost*, they make their "solitary way" out of Eden.[17] Similarly, in 'Dover Beach', the honeymoon poem of the Victorian poet, Matthew Arnold (1867), the couple is also presented as united, but alone, *contra mundum*:

> Ah, love, let us be true
> To one another! for the world, which seems
> To lie before us like a land of dreams,
> So various, so beautiful, so new,
> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night.[18]

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[15] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1895).
[16] Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, VII.
[17] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (London: Henry Washbourne & Co., 1858), book XII, line 649.
[18] Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach' (1867) lines 29-37, at http://www.bartleby.com/254/109.html. Accessed 23/6/2014.

If we return to Milton's prelapsarian Adam and Eve, we find that their self-sufficient unity inspires one of the poet's most memorably humane passages in *Paradise Lost*, beginning: "Hail wedded love, mysterious law."[19] This was amusingly subverted within a few years of the epic's publication by Andrew Marvell. In his poem 'The Garden', with its obvious allusion to Eden, Marvell decisively prefers Adam's originally-created solitary situation before it was spoiled by the arrival of Eve: "Such was that happy garden state, / While man there walked without a mate," and goes on to recall and reject the teaching of Genesis about the necessary helpmate:

> After a place so pure and sweet,
> What other help could yet be meet!
> But 'twas beyond a mortal's share
> To wander solitary there:
> Two paradises 'twere in one
> To live in Paradise alone.[20]

In this witty subversion of Milton and Scripture – all the more remarkable for being accomplished by a friend of the poet and an admirer of *Paradise Lost* – we can discern, beneath the frivolity, something momentous occurring, culturally and theologically. It is the beginning of the modulation from the theocentric to the anthropocentric world-picture of the new age, culminating, in the next century in the Enlightenment. Marvell's praise of the *joie de vivre* of the prototypical Adamic solitude seems to look even further into the future to the Romantic movement and its many celebrations of individual bucolic retreat.

I am interested in the ways solitude was construed in such shifting historical and socio-cultural milieux and, for example, if there are differences in the ways men and women write poetry about it. Three of my favourite women poets, Christina Rossetti, Sylvia Plath, and Stevie Smith link representations of solitude with themes of death, variously configured and certainly not necessarily morbidly expressed. Smith's 'Not Waving but Drowning' is one of the most memorable poems of the solitary experience, throughout the life of its speaker, reflecting the theme of "*l'étranger*" or the outsider which runs through many of her works (as it does through much twentieth-century literature at large), but, as often, so here, she transforms the dire situation with a wry detachment and dark humour, accompanied by her whimsical sketch of the drowning one: "I was much too far out all my life," the short lyric concludes, "And not waving but

[19] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, book IV, line 750.
[20] Andrew Marvell, 'The Garden', in *Selected Poems* (New York: Routledge, 2002), lines 57-8, 59-64.

drowning."[21] In the title poem of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* collection, the poet's speaker is positively ecstatic in achieving freedom on horseback from all the constraints of association, even clothing:

> White
> Godiva, I unpeel –
> Dead hands, dead stringencies.
> And now I
> Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
> The child's cry
> Melts in the wall.
> And I
> Am the arrow,
> The dew that flies,
> Suicidal, at one with the drive
> Into the red
> Eye, the cauldron of morning.[22]

But, as in Smith's poem, the destination is death. I have yet to investigate this fully, but to date I am finding – if I may hazard a generalisation – that male poets tend to wrestle with solitude; female ones are inclined either to celebrate it or submit to it (sometimes grimly, but more often with resignation than men). Certainly, in the one long poem of the twentieth century that has *Solitude* (1938) as its title, by Vita Sackville-West,[23] celebration is the theme, while there is the irony, as Rebecca Nagel has pointed out, that "while writing in solitude about solitude," Sackville-West is "connected to a vast community of other writers and readers."[24] An example of this discrimination between the sexes is the contrast between the representation of solitude in the poetry of those contemporary, later-nineteenth-century poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson. The former, in the course of his so-called 'terrible sonnets', speaks indeed of his personal and theological desolation in isolation as "That night, that year / Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with / (my God!) my God."[25] His emotional separation from all companionable consolation, as his repressed, unmentionable sexual frustration is coupled with his sense of spiritual impotence and of

[21] Stevie Smith, 'Not Waving but Drowning', *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2002), lines 3-4.
[22] Sylvia Plath, 'Ariel', *Ariel* (London: Faber, 1965), p. 37.
[23] Vita Sackville-West, *Solitude: A Poem* (London: Hogarth Press, 1938).
[24] Rebecca Nagel, 'The Classical Tradition in Vita Sackville-West's Solitude', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition,* vol. 15, no. 3 (September 2008), p. 407.
[25] Gerard Manley Hopkins, '40. Carrion Comfort', *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Robert Bridges (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918), p. 49.

uncommunicated and unreciprocated prayers, is expressed thus: "my lament," he writes, "cries like dead letters sent to dearest him that lives alas! Away."[26]

Very differently, but in a similarly inimitable poetry technically speaking (which is making me think about the extent to which and the ways in which solitude makes an impact on word-choice, imagery, even metre, rhythm, and rhyme and the choice of labial or guttural sounds), Dickinson repeatedly conveys a sense of rectitude, purposefulness and stoic acceptance, in lyrics of singular experience and expression such as "I had been hungry all the years…" She develops the gastronomic conceit of the love-feast (with a sacramental sub-text), to describe her original solitary condition. This is configured as singular exteriority opposed to the allure of companionable interiority. When the offer to her at the noon-tide of love's fulfilment is made in a banquet of desire satisfied, she finds – and this is no doubt true to gastroenterology – that having so long existed on a spare diet, the sumptuous spread is painful to digest and quells her desire for such purported and imagined nourishment:

I had been hungry all the years;
My noon had come, to dine;
I, trembling, drew the table near,
And touched the curious wine.

'Twas this on tables I had seen
When turning, hungry, lone,
I looked in windows, for the wealth
I could not hope to own.

I did not know the ample bread,
'Twas so unlike the crumb
The birds and I had often shared
In Nature's dining-room.

The plenty hurt me, 'twas so new, –
Myself felt ill and odd,
As berry of a mountain bush
Transplanted to the road.

Nor was I hungry; so I found
That hunger was a way

[26] Hopkins, '45.', *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, p. 51.

> Of persons outside windows,
> The entering takes away.[27]

One element of the differences between Hopkins and Dickinson, apart from anything that might be construed in terms of the sex of the poets, is their antithetical religious traditions, of Catholic conversion and Puritan heritage, respectively, which could have a powerful influence on the various ways in which solitude is represented and evaluated at large in their poetry.

A good example of masculine wrangling over the solitary state and also an embodiment of the larger tensions which characterise the Early Modern period of English history and literature is John Donne's first satire, "Away thou fondling motley humourist…", which is an arresting representation of his schizophrenic self, as he explores the antithetical lives of streetwise, convivial, libertine Jack and bookish, solitary John.[28] The wit of its derivation from a satire by the Roman poet, Horace,[29] is that the two personages jostling with each other in Donne's poem are his two selves, whereas the Horatian satire has separate individuals inescapably at cross-purposes in the street. Probably written in 1593, when Donne was just nineteen, the poem is bubbling over with the brilliant young man's intellectual curiosity (with an eye, no doubt, to the poem's circulation amongst his fellows at Lincoln's Inn where, unsurprisingly, he was Master of the Revels). Yet it is instinct, too, with that yearning for moral and spiritual sobriety which engendered expressions of the contrariety that was at the core of his being and intensified as he grew older: "oh to vex me," he was to reflect many years later, in one of his Holy Sonnets, "contraries meet in one."[30]

The ruling passion of the satire is the devil-may-care rake's progress-in-miniature of the promiscuous, companionable rebel making his rollicking way through the debauched streets of the virginal Faerie Queene's London; but the potency of the solitary, interior man has at least as much power by virtue, for example, of its framing presence – at the beginning and the end of the satire – and that that sober man is the one who is the speaker of the poem. His dismissive opening imperative ("Away thou fondling motley humourist…"), succinctly sketches the other self, portrayed as particularly enslaved to the passion of sensuality and being subject to the whims of the humours. The Latin word *humor*, meaning body fluid, recalls the medical theories of the four humours and

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[27] Emily Dickinson, 'Hunger', *The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), p. 38.
[28] John Donne, 'Satire I', *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2006), line 1.
[29] Horace, 'Satire IX', *Satires*, book I, trans. A. S. Kline (2005), at http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceSatiresBkISatIX.htm. Accessed 24/06/2014.
[30] John Donne, 'Holy Sonnet XIX', *Selected Poems*, line 1.

as Jack is figuratively garbed in motley, the costume of the court jester or harlequin, that more precise idea of his amusing, entertaining self appears. Donne was much taken with the new ideas of the complex promptings of a person's behaviour, especially his own. His satire on religion begins, "Kind pity chokes my spleen...." [31] Poets such as Sir Philip Sidney, of the previous generation, looked into their hearts and wrote, but in this new age of the advancement of scientific and medical speculation, Donne (as T. S. Eliot tells us) looked further and deeper: into "the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts."[32]

The moral superiority of the solitary man is sketched in his opening account of his enclosed domain, but complicated, too, when the interior life is seen in those early lines as a matter of being confined, as if in prison or a coffin, and with a meagre sustenance of "these few books" in the learned John's library. [33] But the volumes, it turns out, are no less than the recognised depositories of wisdom: theological, philosophical, political, historical and – climactically – poetical.

> Here are God's conduits, grave divines; and here
> Nature's secretary, the philosopher;
> And jolly statesmen, which teach how to tie
> The sinews of a city's mystic body;
> Here gathering chroniclers, and by them stand
> Giddy fantastic poets of each land.[34]

The scholar's domain may be, in Macbeth's phrase, a "cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in" place,[35] as Donne's sly pun on "grave" also indicates (adding to the instability of the evaluative schema of the poem), but the other sense, neatly captured by Wordsworth, is clearly there too:

> Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
> And hermits are contented with their cells;
> And students with their pensive citadels….[36]

Rhetorically, the embryonic Dean of St Paul's asks his boisterous *alter ego*: "Shall I leave all this constant company / And follow headlong, wild uncertain

[31] John Donne, 'Satire III', *Selected Poems*, line 1.
[32] T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 250.
[33] Donne, 'Satire I', line 3.
[34] Donne, 'Satire I', lines 5-10.
[35] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (New York: Folger, 2013), act III, scene 4, line 24.
[36] William Wordsworth, 'Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room', *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), lines 1-3.

thee?"[37] The stolid alliteration of "constant company" is pointedly contrasted with the buoyancy of "wild uncertain thee." In spite of his reservations, stolid John submits to revelling Jack: "I shut my chamber door, and come, let's go,"[38] having exacted what he pretends to imagine is an assurance that, at least on this occasion, Jack will conduct himself in an uncharacteristically seemly manner in public.

Donne's speaker's representation of his licentious self has all the edginess of satire – as the satire form was, through a false etymology, associated at this time with "rough satyrs" (in Milton's phrase):[39] lusty pagan creatures, part-man, part-goat. Delightfully jarring qualities of subject and technique are to be anticipated in the form. No sooner are they outside than the misbehaviour remembered from the past is quickly resumed. And the poetic language, in its breathlessness, mimics the undiscriminating motions of the motleyed one: "Whither, why, when, or with whom thou wouldst go…"[40]

For all the dramatic spontaneity of the street encounters, past and present, we note that our reflective speaker has ordered them systematically. There is the Renaissance love of *copia* in their abundance, but its equally strong devotion to the catalogue or anatomy is present, too. What we encounter, in this rhapsody, as we move through the prominent representatives of the army, the law, and of the world of wealth and courtly aristocracy is a very sour indictment of contemporary society which it is the purpose of a satire to offer, but usually, as here, with the sweetener of comedy. Jack is at least as strongly derided for so obsequiously submitting himself to this degraded world, and not preferring prudent detachment from it in the solitary life, as the representatives of it themselves. An army captain is seen, for example, decked out sumptuously in attire paid for by the monies he is receiving from dead soldiers who have been kept on the payroll. Beneath this serious social criticism, amusingly communicated and so vividly visualised, there is lurking also the idea of the precariousness of the situation of an ambitious middle-class boy, like Donne, seeking the necessary, all-important patronage of one of the great ones of the time, for upward mobility.

The decay of the world, which this satire exposes, reflects one of the most extraordinary Early Modern tensions, with a particularly English incarnation – that between the burgeoning confidence of the Elizabethan-Jacobean period at

[37] Donne, 'Satire I', lines 11-12.
[38] Donne, 'Satire I', line 52.
[39] John Milton, 'Lycidas' in *The Broadview Anthology of Seventeenth-century Verse and Prose*, ed. Alan Rudrum et al. (Peterborough: Broadview, 2000), line 34.
[40] Donne, 'Satire I', line 64.

large and an equal and opposite eschatological sense of the end-time, of change and decay. "Away thou fondling motley humourist" is an early expression of this bitterly negative worldview in Donne's corpus and sexuality is the principal focus of the anatomy of degeneracy that the satire presents as Jack's bisexual voraciousness finds its match in the range of possibilities on offer. The climax of the poem as of its sexual theme is sociable Jack's visit to his unnamed and non-gender-specific "love" towards the end, whom (John notes)

> he in a window spies,
> And like light dew exhaled, he flings from me
> Violently ravished to his lechery...[41]

but he soon has the indignity of being "turned out of door."[42]

Jack finally returns home, to solitude, with a "hanging head," downcast in shame but also satiated sexually. The last gasp of the satire is invested in the paradox of "constantly a while." The constancy of an inconstant man must be temporary. There is no sense that the behaviour will not be resumed tomorrow. The poem, so exhaustive in its account of Jack's eventually exhausted career, induces exhaustion in the reader, too, in its relentless, punchy, unstoppable thrusting (especially if it is read out loud, as all poetry should be), so what is induced in us wittily matches the depletion of the humorous Jack.

Donne's most extensive exploration of the solitary state is in his religious poetry – in the divine meditations (or holy sonnets) and hymns, as well as in the prose work, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, the emergency in this case being Donne's serious illness of November 1623, when typhus was sweeping London. In all of these works, solitude is the necessary pre-condition for the highly-valued exercise and discipline of usually daily meditation to begin and in the 'Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness', written in the midst of the 1623 epidemic and his own illness, Donne takes the enforced solitude of his affliction as an opportunity to contemplate the ultimate solitary experience which all must endure, that of death: "And what I must do then, think now before," he writes.[43] Urgency is added to the situation here as, in the seventeenth century, one's sickbed, as often as not, turned out to be one's deathbed.

Turning enforced solitude, through such as bodily illness, to spiritual advantage was an approach taken, a generation later, by John Milton, suffering from the blindness, which, by 1652, had totally engulfed him, with his major poetic work, an epic poem, still unwritten. God had visited solitude and the other privations of blindness upon him, the poet eventually argues in *Paradise Lost*,

[41] Donne, 'Satire I', lines 106-8.
[42] Donne, 'Satire I', line 110.
[43] Donne, 'Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness', *Selected Poems*, line 5.

in order that he might perceive spiritual matters more keenly. The "inward" light, Milton writes, will enable him to "see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight."[44] One senses that even Milton sensed that *this* divine paradox, at least, was too good to be true, for more extensive and intensive poetry is devoted by him to raging against the dying of his light. This recurring theme in his work persists to his last poem, the closet-drama 'Samson Agonistes', where we hear the heart-rending cry of that broken blind man in his opening address:

> O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
> Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
> Without all hope of day![45]

In 'Samson', Milton's anguish is mediated through the experience of an Old Testament hero ("Eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves").[46] In *Paradise Lost*, in the usually impersonal mode of classical epic, Milton strikingly intrudes his personal story in these several years of the composition of the twelve-book poem, providing moving insights into his solitary condition – primarily as the result of his blindness; but also, in this period of Restoration of Church and King, his theological and political isolation:

> Thus with the year
> Seasons return, but not to me returns
> Day, or the sweet approach of even or morn,
> Or sight of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,
> Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine;
> But cloud instead, and ever-during dark
> Surrounds me, from the cheerful ways of men
> Cut off, and for the book of knowledge fair
> Presented with a universal blank
> Of nature's works to me expunged and razed,
> And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out.[47]

Milton's was a milky blindness, the ophthalmologists have told us, so that "universal blank" is also a *blanc* to register the absolute character of annihilated visual communion.

Milton's under-appreciated use in *Paradise Lost* of the soliloquy (the seminal literary expression of aloneness, from the Latin root *solus*) expresses in more dramatic form and transposed to other characters the sufferings of the isolated circumstances that Milton experienced himself. There are the soliloquies

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[44] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, book III, lines 52, 54-5.
[45] John Milton, 'Samson Agonistes', *John Milton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), lines 80-2.
[46] Milton, 'Samson Agonistes', line 41.
[47] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, book III, lines 40-50.

of Satan, for example (whose several utterances of this kind modulate from self-sufficiency and self-justification to tragic self-knowledge) and Adam's extraordinary, immediately post-lapsarian soliloquy in book X, which is a meditation, in solitude, on the desire for death: "thus Adam to himself lamented loud," Milton comments at its end, as nature is attuned to the first man's dejection, "with black air / Accompanied, with damps and dreadful gloom."[48] Kester Svendsen calls it "one of the loneliest scenes in literature."[49]

But Milton is not always negative in his representation of the solitary state. It can be edifyingly bracing, too. In book V of *Paradise Lost*, in coded terms in reference to the singular seraph Abdiel – and 'seraph' is one of Milton's coinages, from the Hebrew plural 'seraphim', emphasising linguistically Abdiel's singularity in resisting Lucifer – Milton presents himself once more in the role of the political solitary, banished as a result of regime change at the Restoration. And the tone now is exhilarating as the triumph of the single man's righteousness over the pervasive error of the masses is commended:

> …the seraph Abdiel faithful found,
> Among the faithless, faithful only he;
> Among innumerable false, unmoved,
> Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified
> His loyalty he kept, his love, his zeal;
> Nor number, nor example with him wrought
> To swerve from truth, or change his constant mind
> Though single. From amidst them forth he passed,
> Long way through hostile scorn, which he sustained
> Superior, nor of violence feared aught;
> And with retorted scorn his back he turn'd
> On those proud Towers to swift destruction doomed.[50]

Yet nothing compares with the direct personal lament in book VII of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton returns to a poetic vocabulary of anguish in contemplation of his aloneness, as repetition and alliteration accumulate the intensity of the experience of his personal fall, his own loss of paradise, to bear down on the crucial substantive itself:

> fallen on evil days,
> On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues;
> In darkness, and with dangers compassed round,

[48] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, book X, lines 845, 847-8.
[49] Kester Svendsen, 'Adam's Soliloquy in Book X of *Paradise Lost*', in *Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Arthur E. Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 329.
[50] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, book V, lines 896-907.

> And solitude….[51]

His most extended reflection on the solitary state is *Paradise Regained*, which is an account of Jesus' resistance to Satan's temptations in the wilderness, in the course of Milton's extensive exploration of his great Christian Humanist moral theme: the capacity of the individual, with an upright heart and pure, to repel the allure of the Evil One. Jesus' retreat to the Judean desert (recounted in all the synoptic Gospels) is the notable paradigm of elected solitude in the Christian centuries. Milton's poem, an extraordinary paraphrase of the brief scriptural accounts, resonates deeply with the isolated condition that Milton was enduring. In *Paradise Regained*, with its title misleadingly suggesting that it is a sequel to *Paradise Lost*, the commendation of the archetype of the individual wayfaring, warfaring Christian is sustained to the very end, in another of the poet's quietly beautiful, portentous closes as the communality of the heavenly host restoring the messianic conquering hero in transcendental triumph is strikingly contrasted – with a perfectly-placed caesura signalling the antithesis – with what is as securely registered, terrestrially, as the Lord's preferred humble and solitary way:

> Thus they the Son of God our saviour meek
> Sung victor, and from heavenly feast refreshed
> Brought on his way with joy; he unobserved
> Home to his mother's house private returned.[52]

The poetic rhythm and syntax are impelled to that crucial word of the poem at large, in its final line, which is part of the vocabulary of the solitary state: "private."

Finally, with regard to Milton, the rich complexity of his representations of solitude is taken even further if we return to his first poetic essay on the matter where we see, again, that the revelation and probing of solitude in various contexts of negativity had not always been the case in his life and work. Milton had composed, in his last days at Cambridge, two poems in the way of an academic debate about the comparative virtues of the active and contemplative lives (a favourite topic of Renaissance speculation): *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. While impeccably discharging the obligations to give each vocation its due, he seems, by virtue (again) of a particularly personal intrusion, to give the latter his final seal of approval in lines which have the accents of an intended lifetime's vocation. The difference here (from later representations) is that the imagined solitude, freely chosen by this impassioned champion of the individual's God-given liberty, is palpably relished:

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[51] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, book VII, lines 25-8.
[52] John Milton, *Paradise Regained* (London: John Starkey, 1670), book IV, lines 636-9.

But let my due feet never fail,
To walk the studious cloisters pale,
And love the high embowèd roof
With antic pillars' massy proof,
And storied windows richly dight,
Casting a dim religious light.
There let the pealing organ blow,
To the full voiced choir below,
In service high, and anthems clear,
As may with sweetness, through mine ear,
Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all heaven before mine eyes.[53]

For the Irishman, William Butler Yeats, another poet of civil war, three centuries on, contemplating his own symbol of solitary detachment, the Norman Thoor Ballylee in County Galway – "I declare this tower is my symbol,"[54] he announced – Milton's representation of the solitary poet and scholar in *Il Penseroso* was the focus of the Irishman's portrayal of his own idealised self in 'My House':

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,
A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,
A candle and written page.
Il Penseroso's Platonist toiled on
In some like chamber, shadowing forth
How the daemonic rage
Imagined everything.
Benighted travellers
From markets and from fairs
Have seen his midnight candle glimmering.[55]

Taking Milton's self-sufficient and self-fulfilling representation of solitude further, Yeats configures the solitary as an inspiration to others. He is seen, both literally and figuratively, as a light-giver to those benighted ones. There is a contrast too, in the portrayal by this poet (whose work is an endless conversation of antitheses) between the stillness of the solitary in his tower and the constant motion of those below, engaged in the world's Heraclitean flux.

Yeats's solitary tower-dweller inspires passers-by. More typical, in the history of the poetry of solitude, are the many representations of solitaries as watchers and interpreters of the human condition, from the vantage point of their

[53] John Milton, 'L'Allegro', *Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin), lines 155-66.
[54] William Butler Yeats, 'Blood and the Moon', *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 1 (New York: Scribner, 1997), line 18.
[55] Yeats, 'My House', *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, lines 11-20.

isolation. Two obvious examples of this, in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively, are Thomas Gray and Philip Larkin. In the case of Gray, whose life was one of the most self-consciously melancholy imaginable, his self-representation as an assessor of varieties of the human condition appears to be that of the solitary as voyeur. At the opening of the famous elegy, Gray notes, delightedly, that at day's end, as he begins his concentrated account of the imagined lives of the villagers buried in the churchyard, the world is left "to darkness and to me."[56] But the epitaph at the poem's close, which is presented as a tribute to one of the rustics he has conjured, is at least as much about Gray (the cosseted don) as the fair village youth: "Melancholy marked him for her own" and "he gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend."[57] Then, in the 'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College', Gray watches the boys in their teamwork on the playing-fields, from the individualistic positions both of physical detachment and world-weary maturity. He muses on their sad destinies as adults. He had been a pupil at Eton himself, so in a sense he is looking at and assessing the fate of types of his own boyhood:

> To each his sufferings: all are men,
> Condemn'd alike to groan;
> The tender for another's pain,
> Th' unfeeling for his own.
> Yet ah! why should they know their fate?
> Since sorrow never comes too late,
> And happiness too swiftly flies?
> Thought would destroy their paradise.
> No more; where ignorance is bliss,
> 'Tis folly to be wise.[58]

Larkin's critical representation of relationship and communality from the separateness of solitude is, arguably, the major theme of his poetry as his detachment from them was an important component of his life. "Deprivation is for me," he wryly observed, "what daffodils were for Wordsworth."[59] His seemingly-frivolous but still-arresting assessments of human experience in general, and of his own, are known well beyond the poetry-reading community.

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[56] Thomas Gray, 'Elegy', *The Works of Thomas Gray* (London: Harding, Triphook, and Lepard, 1825), line 4.
[57] Gray, 'Elegy', lines 120, 124.
[58] Thomas Gray, 'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College', *The Works of Thomas Gray*, lines 91-100.
[59] Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with the *Observer*', *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 47.

'This Be The Verse', in his last collection in 1974, indicates a summing-up of his essential theme:

> Man hands on misery to man,
> It deepens like a coastal shelf.
> Get out as quickly as you can,
> And don't have any kids yourself.[60]

Larkin was true to his own teaching about human reproduction. It could hardly be otherwise, as he tells us, in another poem from the same collection, 'Annus Mirabilis', that

> Sexual intercourse began
> In nineteen sixty-three
> (which was rather late for me)…[61]

The poor old thing was forty-one then, but as the recently-published letters to Monica Jones, his girlfriend for many years, reveal, his poetic effusions of celibate solitude were not entirely true to the life (which raises, of course, that perennial warning, in all art, that one should not necessarily infer autobiography from a creator's work).[62] Less flippantly, more subtly, in other poems, Larkin discusses – rather than forthrightly presents – his essential loner's status, engaging in a mental tussle with it that is vividly focused on a scene or situation. Fortunately for us, given his modest output of poetry, it was the topic that most regularly pricked him into composition. 'Dockery and Son' is one of these works of debate; 'Reasons for Attendance' is the most obvious example of it. Here Larkin, alone outside, contemplates the couples at a dance inside:

> Why be out here?
> But then, why be in there?
> … Surely, to think the lion's share
> Of happiness is found by couples – sheer
> Inaccuracy, as far as I'm concerned…[63]

The poem closes ambiguously, chillingly indeed in its implications about the wrong life-decisions that might be made with regard to elected solitude and the self-deception that can sustain it:

> Therefore I stay outside,
> Believing this; and they maul to and fro,

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[60] Philip Larkin, 'This Be The Verse', *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 30.
[61] Larkin, 'Annus Mirabilis', *High Windows*, p. 34.
[62] Philip Larkin, *Letters to Monica* (London; Faber and Faber, 2010).
[63] Philip Larkin, 'Reasons for Attendance', *The Less Deceived* (London: The Marvell Press, 1973), p. 18.

Believing that; and both are satisfied,
If no one has misjudged himself. Or lied.[64]

Aloneness, for Larkin, was not his own peculiarity, but the fundamental human yearning, as he proposes in 'Wants':

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:
However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards
However we follow the printed directions of sex
However the family is photographed under the flag-staff –
Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.[65]

In one of his finest poems, 'The Whitsun Weddings', in which Larkin's accomplishment in the difficult form of the spacious stanza is eminently displayed, the speaker has forgotten to remember, being long disconnected from such bonding rituals, that he is travelling to London by train on a holiday popular for wedding ceremonies. So, at each station, newlyweds climb on board bound for their honeymoons and lifetimes together. As they have entered formally into relationships for life that very day, so, accidently and briefly, he has formed one with them – as he watches the couples, at first distractedly, then with more curiosity, being progressively drawn into the occasion, in spite of himself, as the train irresistibly and determinedly impels all of them from the eccentric provinces to central London. The "frail / Travelling coincidence" of Larkin's experience, as he terms it this Whitsun weekend, is applied to theirs: "none / Thought of the others they would never meet / Or how their lives would all contain this hour;" and the portentous close of the poem is rich with foreboding in its forecast of the uncertain futurity of relationship, meteorologically configured:

We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.[66]

In the ironically-entitled 'Church Going' (and the absence of the hyphen between the two words is as important as the words), the poet offers us something exceptional in his many and varied meditations on and debates about solitude. While lamenting the "going" of churches, he celebrates what his going to them affords, alone and pointedly outside service time when others might intrude on his experience: "Once I am sure there's nothing going on / I step

[64] Larkin, 'Reasons for Attendance', p. 18.
[65] Larkin, 'Wants', *The Less Deceived*, p. 22.
[66] Philip Larkin, 'The Whitsun Weddings', *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 23.

inside." He is on the brink of a revelation, which only solitude can foster. It is celebrated as a pleasure:

> It pleases me to stand in silence here;
> A serious house on serious earth it is,
> In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
> Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
> And that much never can be obsolete,
> Since someone will forever be surprising
> A hunger in himself to be more serious,
> And gravitating with it to this ground,
> Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
> If only that so many dead lie round.[67]

Silence, stillness, solitude and the seriousness of the experience and evaluation of life that they produce form the poem's climax. All are disregarded today in what T.S. Eliot presciently described, seventy years ago, in *Four Quartets*, as our "twittering world."[68]

Indeed, 'Church Going' presents uniquely in Larkin's poetry what is found more often in Eliot's and what lies at the heart of his masterwork, completed during the Second World War. A meditation, philosophically-speaking, on time and timelessness, *Four Quartets* concludes with a poem which includes an experience of church-going; again, alone, but at a specified place which gives its name to the Quartet: Little Gidding in Huntingdonshire. The experience which Eliot had there, in solitude, is one of the many episodes of epiphany in Modernist texts, such as we find, for example, in the prose of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, who privilege such times to oneself for special insight. Mrs Ramsay, in *To the Lighthouse*, for example, in the aftermath of such an epiphanic experience, "always felt," Woolf writes, that "one helped oneself out of solitude reluctantly by laying hold of some little odd or end."[69] The Modernist epiphany, unlike the original biblical one to the Magi, is always experienced alone and, for Eliot, it occurs at what he terms the time and "place of solitude where three dream cross."[70] These "dreams" are the illusions of past, present and future as, in the context of the superior reality of the solitary's epiphany, time, momentarily, is annihilated, "at the still point of the turning

[67] Larkin, 'Church Going', *The Less Deceived*, p. 29.
[68] T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), part III, p. 174.
[69] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 88.
[70] T. S. Eliot, 'Ash-Wednesday, 1930', *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot*, part VI, p. 98

world," his principal metaphor in *Four Quartets*.[71] Both Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* and Eliot in his poetry describe the fleeting experience, metaphorically, in terms of *moments musicaux*: "you are the music / While the music lasts," Eliot writes.[72] So it is very much to the purpose of the representation of the solitary's epiphany that the poet's most extensive exploration of the idea is found in poems that are called *Quartets*. The wit of his presentation of the particular epiphany in 'Little Gidding' is that, for all its individuality, Eliot emphasises its availability, and he does so by communicating it to the reader in the singular second person, and in an insistent incantation on that pronoun which draws us into the occasion:

> If you came this way,
> Taking the route you would be likely to take
> From the place you would be likely to come from,
> If you came this way in may time, you would find the hedges
> White again, in May, with voluptuary sweetness.[73]

As with Larkin, the wisdom that is derived comes only through the willingness to surrender to solitude, stillness and silence.

Some Closing Thoughts

Through the ages it has been the role of the poets and their poetry to remind us, in incomparable language and imagery, of what is profound and enduring in human life and, for that reason, poetry, like Larkin's serious earth, cannot only never be obsolete, but especially if, as Susan Sontag has argued, to defend seriousness in modern Western societies has become an adversarial act, the unique power of poetry to claim us for wisdom, in the midst of our twittering world, has never been more necessary. Poetry is typically composed in solitude and, what is more, is best appreciated there. As Peter Holbrook wrote in the *Australian Literary Review*, "reading involves self-cultivation and spiritual discipline: a withdrawal from the world, from normal human contact, and retirement into some private inner space," and, once in that solitude, he continues, we are ready to

> encounter ultimate questions of human life. Literature demands we think about them. It addresses us not as beasts or slaves, not as cogs in a machine, but as beings endowed [in Hamlet's phrase] with large discourse.

[71] Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', parts II and IV, pp. 173, 175.
[72] T. S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages', *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot,* part V, p. 190.
[73] T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot,* part I, p. 192.

> Literature is about the world but opposed to worldliness, the opinion, dominant now, that human life is a matter of sleeping and feeding.[74]

In our reading of poetry, in other words, we must cultivate submission to what the poem has to say, if we are to hear what it has to say to us. This is an exercise in what is another conspicuously unfashionable activity today, the nurture of the virtue of humility. Those of us who teach and profess the reading and appreciation of poetry assist others in the processes of attending to what the poets have to say, to what Gerald Wilkes calls the "range of experience and imagination that is greater than that of any individual reader."[75] Particularly, we would alert others to nuances of meaning – especially in various historical and socio-cultural settings, where intelligent reading and informed receptivity require contextualisation and biographical and other information about the poet and his or her convictions. We also strive to lead readers into the appreciation of the arresting beauty and power of utterance in verse through poets' use and adaptation of various techniques of language, so that our students' reading lives may be informed and enriched and that they may become articulate sharers of this humane experience with others.

Every poet I have referred to, so far, is deceased. But poetry continues to be written and new poets are constantly coming into view. One of the most accomplished of modern poets is Sydney's own Judith Beveridge and it is with her words, not mine, that I want to close. In Beveridge's beautiful poem, 'Orb Spider', where, typically, she combines her characteristic wise insights with a technical mastery not always encountered in contemporary verse, she presents us with one of nature's creatures in a state of serene and concentrated solitude, going about her life's business. The poet invests all this with a series of circular images, taking us back to such as Renaissance conceptions of the circle as the symbol of perfect unity, as in an orb or a hoop, to which she also refers in the poem. It is a poem about the orb spider, but it is also a poem about the self-sufficiency and self-fulfilment of solitude, and, most tellingly of all, perhaps, a poem about poetry and the creative process which produces it, the satisfaction of its accomplishment on completion and the inspiration and consolation which, through the chances and changes of our mortal lives, the well-wrought poem communicates to all who have ears to hear the voice of the Bard:

> I saw her, pegging out her web
> thin as a pressed flower in the bleaching light.
> From the bushes a few small insects
> clicked like opening seed-pods. I knew some

[74] Peter Holbrook, 'Words that make the world afresh', *The Australian Literary Review*, vol. 6, issue 9 (October, 2011), p. 13.
[75] Gerald Wilkes, *Studying Literature* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1985), p. 5.

would be trussed up by her and gone next morning.
She was so beautiful spinning her web
above the marigolds the sun had made
more apricot, more amber; any bee
lost from its solar flight could be gathered
back to the anther, and threaded onto the flower
like a jewel.
    She hung in the shadows
as the sun burnt low on the horizon
mirrored by the round garden bed. Small petals
moved as one flame, as one perfectly-lit hoop.
I watched her work, produce her known world,
a pattern, her way to traverse
a little portion of the sky;
a simple cosmography, a web drawn
by the smallest nib. And out of my own world
mapped from smallness, the source
of sorrow pricked, I could see
immovable stars.
    Each night
I saw the same dance in the sky,
the pattern like a match-box puzzle,
tiny balls stuck in a grid until shaken
so much, all the orbits were in place.
Above the bright marigolds
of that quick year, the hour-long day,
she taught me to love the smallest transit,
that the coldest star has planetesimal beauty.
I watched her above the low flowers
tracing her world, making it one perfect drawing.[76]

[76] Judith Beveridge, 'Orb Spider', *The Domesticity of Giraffes* (Wentworth Falls: Black Lightning Press, 1987), p. 18.